

CHRISTMAS GESTS
BY
HARRY PRICE

CHRISTMAS GHOSTS

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CHRISTMAS GHOSTS

It was Charles Dickens who really popularized the "Christmas ghost." At least, it was his writings which, more than those of any other author, associated ghosts with Christmas in the minds of the reading public. Who can doubt that the immortal and repentent Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol : Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*,¹ was responsible for millions of people accepting without demur the possibility of the beneficent influence of the dead over the living? Thackeray called this story "a national benefit," and his words are as true to-day as they were

¹ London, 1843.

when *A Christmas Carol* was published.

Dickens found that the story of Scrooge and his friends was to the public taste, and his next tale (written in a villa on the outskirts of Genoa) was about another Christmas ghost. This was *The Chimes : A Goblin Story of Some Bells that rang an Old Year out and a New Year in.*¹ This, too, became popular, and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain : A Fancy for Christmas Time,*² soon followed. In 1852 appeared the first collected edition³ of the famous "Christmas books," and the Christmas ghost was established for all time !

¹ London, 1845. ² London, 1848.

³ *Christmas Books*, London, 1852.

Dickens Did Not Believe in Ghosts

Did Dickens believe in ghosts? I think it is very doubtful. Though he exploited them in his novels, he lost no opportunity in denouncing the "spirits" of the séance-room. Between the years 1860 and 1864 a number of attacks on spiritualism appeared in *All the Year Round*, which he was then editing. These articles were not signed by Dickens, but there is little doubt that he wrote them—or at least inspired them. Such articles as "Tom in Spirits,"¹ "Modern Magic,"²

¹ *All the Year Round*, 8th September, 1860.

² *Ibid.*, 28th July, 1860.

"Fallacies of Faith,"¹ "Lufkin on Davingpodge,"² and others bitterly—and cleverly—attacked, spiritualistic séances and the mediums of the day. In particular, he lost no opportunity in ridiculing the famous and fashionable medium, D. D. Home, who was then very much in the public eye. His article, "The Martyr Medium,"³ was a review of—and attack on—Home's *Incidents in My Life*,⁴ which every one was then reading. It is evident that in later life Dickens

¹ Ibid., 15th September, 1860.

² Ibid., 10th December, 1864.

³ Ibid., 4th April, 1863.

⁴ London, 1863.

thought that ghosts were becoming too popular.

Though Dickens popularized Christmas ghosts, he did not invent them, and many books have been published dealing with the "spirits" of Christmas as well as with the spirit of Christmas. It would be tedious to enumerate these works, but one little book in my library I must mention, and that is *Round About our Coal-Fire: or, Christmas Entertainments; containing Christmas Gambols, Tropes, Figures, etc., with Abundance of Fiddle-Faddle-Stuff; such as Stories of Fairies, Ghosts, Hobgoblins, Witches, Bull-beggars, Rawheads, and Bloody-Bones. . . . Very proper to be*

read in all Families. This blood-curdling little work was published in London just before Christmas, 1740, and was intended to be read while the family was sitting round its “coal-fire”—then a luxury in the more humble households. Actually, the title of the book is more exciting than its contents, but the work contains many ghost stories intended to create the real Christmas atmosphere.

Why are ghost stories particularly associated with Christmas? The reason is, I think, that in the early days Christmas was the time of year when people did not stray far from their homes. Dark nights, snowed-up roads,

bad weather, difficulty with—or total lack of—transit facilities, made it almost impossible for the country people to leave their firesides during the Christmas season, and their amusements were dependent upon their own resources. Christmas has always been a time for story-telling, and what more natural than that these stories should deal with the unseen, the unknown, and the fearsome—"the ghosts of our own airy belief," as Dickens says? The darkness outside, the long nights, the howling wind or the driven snow against the window-pane—all these natural phenomena provided an appropriate setting for

the recital of supernatural phenomena while sitting round the “coal-fire” or Yule log. The “powers of darkness” reigned supreme in the winter.

Christmas Ghosts are Ancient

The association of Christmas with the supernatural can be traced right back to the dawn of Christianity. For example, to this day in Sweden the village folk scatter straw over certain rooms on Christmas Eve—a tribute to the Holy Birth and lowly stable at Bethlehem. In the Hartz Mountains' district of Germany, also on Christmas Eve, the wood-cutters build rough-model mangers of twigs in the forests and pray for the shades of their ancestral dead. At least, they used to : the Third Reich, I believe, frowned upon these

superstitions. Other superstitions which are not exactly encouraged in Germany include the baking of special bread on Christmas Eve. This is—or was—sprinkled with the evening dew, and the bread so treated is then supposed to have acquired miraculous and curative properties, and is afterwards used for a variety of purposes where a magical effect is desired. Similar beliefs are to this day current in various Scandinavian countries. In central Europe and the Near East, vampires and were-wolves are most feared at Christmastide, and special services of protection or exorcism are still held in order that the living shall be protected

from the dead. In certain villages on Christmas Eve the family of a recently deceased loved one meet just before midnight round the burial place and pray that the corpse shall be undisturbed. When twelve o'clock strikes, they sprinkle leaves of dried garlic over the grave and then adjourn to the house of the nearest relative of the deceased, where the virtues of the dear departed are extolled, liquid refreshments being handed round the while.

And now for an account of some practical Christmas ghost-hunting. I have been asked very frequently whether "ghosts," in the séance-room sense, or in haunted houses, are more active

round about Christmas than at other times of the year. My answer is "No." The fact that more ghosts are seen—or alleged to be seen—in the winter months is because the nights are longer and the days are more dreary than in the summer. And more people go "ghost-hunting" during the shorter days because, I suspect, they have nothing better to do. I remember *The Times* once had a leading article on "A Close Season for Ghosts," and the writer wondered what happened to them when the various psychic societies were taking their long summer holidays. Though more cases of haunted houses are reported to me during the winter, it is only

because more people are "investigating" them.

During my year's tenancy of Borley Rectory, near Sudbury, Suffolk, the "most haunted house in England," from May, 1937, to May, 1938, the quietest time was round about Christmas. The forty observers who were, successively, in charge of the place reported practically nothing during the last part of December, 1937, though phenomena began to be recorded very early in the New Year. In fact, one of the most convincing manifestations occurred when, with a friend, I visited the rectory about the second week in January, 1938. I will relate what happened.

Hunting the Borley Ghosts

Because of the dearth of phenomena during the Christmas holidays—during which one intrepid soul spent ten days in the house by himself!—I decided to visit the rectory in order to ascertain whether, as was suggested, a previous “exorcism” had at last “worked”—a sort of delayed action, as it were. I invited a young Oxford graduate to accompany me, and we arrived at Borley (which is just within the Essex border) early in the afternoon. After a thorough examination of the place and the

affixing of our seals on all outside doors and windows, we locked ourselves in and hoped for the best—or rather worst, if the reader is afraid of ghosts. We then prepared to make some tea and settle down for the evening.

But I must first say a few words about the rectory itself. The building is new and yet it is old. This sounds paradoxical until I mention that the present red brick structure is less than eighty years old, though the foundations (and, I think, part of the cellars) are those of much more ancient buildings. There is some ground, too, for the local belief that originally an ancient monastery occupied part of the

site. There are also stories of an old nunnery in the immediate vicinity, with a tunnel connecting the two. A portion of an underground passage is still to be seen in the farmyard adjoining the rectory. There is also a mediæval castle near by—besieged by Oliver Cromwell—and on the site of the present buildings was built the chaplain's house, or manor house. The present rectory (or what remains of it, as it was severely damaged by fire soon after Christmas, 1938) was built in 1865 by the Rev. Henry Bull, whose family owned most of the adjoining land. He had a family of fourteen children and wanted a large house. And that is why

the rectory, when I rented it, had some thirty rooms in it.

These rooms, and especially the grounds, are supposed to be haunted by the spirit of a nun, among other apparitions, which are said to have been seen at different times. The nun was a young novice from the near-by nunnery who eloped with a lay brother employed at the monastery. They escaped in a black coach with two horses. Their flight was discovered ; they were pursued, brought back, and received the punishment for these venial sins sometimes meted out in the old days : the girl was bricked up alive in one of the cells of the nunnery, and the lay

brother was hanged. A number of people—including the wife of a B.B.C. official—declare that they have seen the nun or phantom coach or both—and the “Nun’s Walk” is now the chief path through the rectory grounds. Sometimes the nun has been seen peering into the rooms of the rectory.

One of these apartments I converted into what we called the Base Room. It was really the old study, and in it I placed a table, camp-bed, lamps, chairs, stoves, etc., and a number of books. Usually my observers “ghost-hunted” in couples, and when one was on duty in the upper part of the house, his

companion would rest in the Base Room.

Well, after tea on that early January afternoon, my friend and I prepared to settle down and await darkness—and what darkness might bring. The Oxford man sat at the table and began reading a newspaper. I was stretched full length on the camp-bed and I might have been about to drop off into a doze. The door of the Base Room was wide open in order that any sound above-stairs could be heard by us. It was a very still afternoon, with a Scotch mist outside, and everything was absolutely quiet in this exceptionally quiet Essex backwater.

A Psychic Interruption

Just about five o'clock, when it was quite dark in the Base Room, my friend lit the oil lamp in order that he could continue his reading. He was sitting near the door, and I was still reclining on the camp-bed. He had hardly picked up his newspaper again, when we were startled by the sound of three short, sharp raps, repeated three times, which appeared to come from the Base Room door, which was in full view of, and quite near, my friend. The Oxford boy was a tyro at ghost-hunting,

and it rather unnerved him for a moment. He could see there was nothing at or near the door. I sat up on the bed.

We waited a minute or so for a repetition of the raps. As these were not forthcoming, I jumped off the bed with the intention of exploring the passage leading to the Base Room. I had hardly crossed the room when both of us heard loud footsteps traversing the passage outside the room. They appeared to be passing our door. Before we had recovered from our surprise—if I can use so mild a term—a door slammed in the back part of the house, near the kitchen quarters.

We rushed out of the Base

Room and down the long passage which led to the kitchen, but found nothing disturbed. We had carefully noted the position of each door, and none had been moved by so much as a hair's-breadth. All our seals were intact, and no one could have entered or left the house without our knowledge. At least, no tangible being could have done so. With our torches we then searched the whole house from attics to cellars without finding anything that would account for the almost incredible noises—incredible under the circumstances—which we had heard. There is a French proverb to the effect that a ghost was never seen by

two pairs of eyes ; but two pairs of ears undoubtedly heard the raps on the door and the foot-steps. And there was nothing ambiguous about the slamming of that door !

It had been our intention to stay at Borley throughout that night, but my friend thought he had better be getting back to London, and as on this occasion it happened to be his car which had brought us to Borley, I, perforce, had to return with him. After some supper we packed up the odds and ends of our ghost-hunting kit and returned to town.

A Planchette Prediction Fulfilled

The above adventure at Borley Rectory may appear strange to those of my readers unacquainted with this case, but I could relate a hundred even stranger occurrences there. More than fifty witnesses have testified to remarkable happenings or startling phenomena at this rectory. For half a century the place has been haunted, and I have a dossier relating to this case that would fill a small trunk. It will be published in book form. As to why it is haunted, and the causation of the phenomena, these are

questions that may be settled some day. I have certain theories of my own, which I have elaborated elsewhere.¹ But, as in the case of so many haunted houses, the phenomena appear to be cyclic and recurrent at definite intervals. I have already mentioned that Borley Rectory was burnt down soon after Christmas, 1938. Just twelve months previously, one of our observers was killing time at Borley playing with the planchette—that heart-shaped toy on wheels used for “automatic writing.” Amongst the many “messages” he received (all of which were

¹ *Fifty Years of Psychical Research*, London, 1939.

preserved), one was to the effect that Borley would be burned out, the fire originating on a landing. *This prediction was fulfilled to the letter exactly one year later.*

I Set a Trap for a Ghost

Although ghosts do not appear to be more active at Christmas than at any other period of the year, I have investigated alleged haunts during the Christmas holidays, sometimes with interesting results. For example, during the Christmas vacation of 1925, I inquired into the phenomenon of some strange footsteps which were heard by the tenants of a small cottage in Surrey, and in many ways the case is unique.

The cottage itself was not haunted, but the people living in it continually heard footsteps

on the gravel path which encircled the building. The manifestations commenced as soon as the place was occupied. During the first week the woman twice went to the door, thinking it was the postman, but no one was there. The path had been newly gravelled and the lightest step upon it could be heard within the house, which was off the main road and quite isolated. The only occupants of the cottage were the husband and wife, the former being out all day.

A peculiarity of this particular "haunt" was that the footsteps were heard punctually at eight-thirty on most mornings, but especially towards the end of the

week, though never on a Sunday. A watch was kept in the garden from certain sheds that commanded a view of the pathway, but the perambulating ghost was never seen, and never heard except from within the cottage.

Unaware that the entity never "walked" on a Sunday, I first visited the cottage on a Saturday night, hoping to hear the foot-steps on the following morning. Learning that this was highly improbable, on the Sunday I busied myself with making four wide and shallow trenches across the path. I filled these trenches with a mixture of flour and silver sand which I made perfectly smooth with a newspaper in the

hope that the ghost's footprints would be impressed upon it. Next morning I was up early, had breakfast, and waited for the intangible visitor. On the stroke of half-past eight, the steps could be heard approaching. They appeared to come from the back of the cottage. There was nothing peculiar about the steps—it was just as if a man, with rather a firm tread, were approaching the house. I ran into the small hall and peered through the letter-box. Nothing was seen to pass, but I could hear the footsteps as they came nearer and nearer, and gradually died away. I rushed out of the cottage, but could find no one. I searched

the buildings without success. The man belonging to the house had left for work soon after seven o'clock and no servant was employed. There were no animals in the immediate neighbourhood. The nearest habitation was nearly half a mile away. I was convinced that no person was playing a trick on me. I examined my trenches, but they were quite unmarked. I was disappointed that no impressions of footprints were visible—even the mark of a cloven hoof would have been acceptable! I visited the cottage three times in all, but heard the footsteps on the first occasion only. The cottage became vacant a few months

after my last visit ; the place was taken by two maiden ladies who turned the house into a tea garden. It did not pay, but whether the " footsteps " or the lack of custom was responsible for their vacating the cottage, I never ascertained. But the place is still empty.

A "*Sympathetic*" Ghost

Another Christmas "ghost" I investigated turned out to be a natural phenomenon instead of a supernatural one, but as the incident was both instructive and amusing, I will relate it here.

Many years ago I was spending Christmas in a Shropshire village. On New Year's Eve I retired to rest soon after ten o'clock, leaving my bedroom window open according to my usual custom. At about eleven-forty-five I was awakened by the church bells ringing in the New Year. The little church was only about two

hundred yards from the house in which I was staying. As I lay awake listening to them, I fancied that with their clangour I could hear sweet music coming from the dining-room, which was immediately below my bed-chamber. As I listened, I could distinctly hear faint chords as from a harp or zither. Then I remembered that in the apartment below me was a piano, and it occurred to me that someone might be twanging the strings, producing a sort of *pizzicato* effect. It sounded most weird, and one could easily have imagined a ghostly harpist in the room below. I decided to investigate and made my way to

the lower story. I quickly solved the mystery. Actually, the explanation was quite simple. I discovered that certain notes from the piano recurred always during a particular peal from the bells, and this gave me the clue to the "ghostly music." The wires of the piano were vibrating in sympathy with the noisy bells. This "sympathetic vibration" is well known to physicists. In the same way, Caruso, the famous tenor, could emit a note that would crack a wine-glass in the immediate vicinity.

The Face at the Window

It was also in the New Year that I had a strange adventure in Austria, at the beautiful spa of Baden-bei-Wien. I was staying in Vienna at the time, and read in one of the papers that much excitement prevailed in Baden owing to the alleged ghost that was haunting a cheap pension not far from the Theresienstrasse. I took an electric tram to Baden, where I arrived about seven o'clock in the evening. I made my way to the house, presented my card, was admitted, and heard the full story of the haunting.

It appears that on the morning of the previous day, a young girl staying at the *pension* had committed suicide by throwing herself out of one of the upper windows. The body had been removed to the mortuary.

Twenty-four hours later, passers-by declared they saw her staring out of the identical window from which she had leapt to her death. Boarders in the house were convinced that they could hear screams coming from the room she had occupied. I spent some hours at the *pension* and must admit that I, too, thought I heard very faint screams coming from the girl's room. But when I entered the apart-

ment, I could neither see nor hear anything unusual. By the time I had finished my investigation it was very late, and I was fortunate in finding a taxi to take me back to Vienna. Next day I again visited the place, and stood for some hours outside the *pension* in the hope of seeing the "face at the window." I was unfortunate, and saw nothing—except the gaping crowds which impeded the traffic. Like most of these local "psychic" sensations, the Baden ghost died a natural death—if I can use such an expression—and I am still wondering whether I really heard those faint screams outside the dead girl's room. Imagination

often plays a major part in these cases. Imagination or not, the proprietor of the *pension* lost all his boarders, and I heard that the house had been closed.

The Girl in the Blue Room

Speaking of faces at the window reminds me that on the Sunday, evening following the Borley fire, a young man from Long Melford, accompanied by a girl friend, visited the rectory in order to inspect the ruins. They made their way through the grounds to the back of the house where the best view of the damage could be obtained. It was full moon, and a bright, still evening.

Although all the upper part of Borley Rectory was burnt out, the brick gable ends are still standing. In the centre of the

house is a gable which once contained the window of the Blue Room—a bedroom which figures largely in all accounts of the manifestations at Borley.

As the two young people gazed at the charred ruins in the moonlight, they saw a girl, dressed in white (or very pale blue) lean out of the Blue Room window—or what remains of it—and then fall back amongst the burnt rafters. I have interviewed the young man concerning this incident, and nothing can shake his conviction that both he and his companion saw this apparition—for apparition it must have been. His girl friend is equally emphatic that she saw the figure,

which was perfectly visible for several seconds. Their testimony rather gives the lie to the old French saw about two pairs of eyes never seeing a ghost at the same time.

So much for "Christmas ghosts" in haunted houses. Of the many séances I have held, or attended round about Christmas-tide, most have been blank—or merely nonsensical—but those I conducted with Rudi Schneider during the period December, 1929, to January, 1930, were brilliant. Rudi is, of course, the famous Austrian medium whom I brought to London, and at the period I have mentioned he was definitely at the top of

his form. Actually, the most brilliant séance of all during this first visit of Rudi to my laboratory was held on Monday, 23rd December, 1929.

My Best Christmas Séance

The séance was held under exceptional conditions of control. Every sitter wore metallic gloves and socks which were sealed to his person. These socks and gloves formed part of an electrical circuit which lit up a row of red lamps. Every one clasped the hand of his neighbour, and every foot had to be firmly placed on one of a series of metal plates screwed to the floor. If a person failed to press the hand of his neighbour, or lifted a foot off his respective plate, a red light was instantly extinguished, thus

revealing the fact that the control was broken. Rudi was not only held by two persons, one of whom was myself, but was also controlled electrically by a separate circuit. He could move neither hand nor foot without the tell-tale lights warning us that the control of him was imperfect. In addition to this electrical control, all the sitters and medium were enclosed in a large gauze cage, making it quite impossible for any one to cheat, or play tricks, or even move a limb, without instant detection.

A pair of heavy plush curtains (the "cabinet") had been placed across one corner of the séance-room, within the gauze cage. Of

course, the medium and his controllers sat outside the cabinet, which was about one metre from the nearest sitter. The switching off of the white lights automatically switched on a red one, by means of which we could see all that was going on.

I will try to describe my impressions of this séance, but words almost fail me, as it is impossible to do justice to what we all saw at this most interesting sitting. The best phenomena were presented in the full light of the red lamp hanging in front of the curtain opening, through which we all saw a very white delicate hand (like a woman's) steal and try to pick up a rose

which a sitter was holding under the lamp. The hand emerged from the cabinet (like a timid mouse coming out of its hole) for a distance of about eight inches, but did not get within two or three inches of the sitter's hand. Virtually, the hand of the sitter was between Rudi and the phenomenon. One thinks of these things afterwards, but it is a pity that the sitter did not move his hand a little in order to meet the "pseudopod" (literally "false limb"), or "terminal." But he did make contact later. The hand was extraordinarily white—much whiter than the handkerchief over which the terminal appeared, and very much

whiter than the sitter's hand and the pale yellow artificial rose which lay in his palm. All the other members of the circle commented upon this whiteness. All this was plainly visible under the naked red bulb. The sitter (who, of course, had the best view, as his eyes were but a few inches from the "hand") thinks that the movements of the white terminal stopped at about three inches from his own hand ; I thought it came rather nearer, but I saw it from a different angle. Like the rest of the sitters, I saw only four fingers, long and tapering, and could see no thumb. I have simulated the experiment with my own hand,

and I find that the "hand" was visible to me for about ten seconds during emergence and withdrawal. The other sitters may have seen it for a shorter or greater period; this would depend upon where they sat and if the emergence of the hand were hidden by any part of the folds of the curtains through which the pseudopod pushed itself.

A second striking manifestation was witnessed, even while a sitter was moving the table away from the curtain; the latter did not stop swinging and billowing. This fact suggests all sorts of possibilities, but we did not have Rudi long enough to carry out the necessary experiments.

Another curious phenomenon was that the curtains, at one period of their movements, were formed into steps and appeared quite stiff, just as if they had been laid over a flight of stairs. I afterwards tried to simulate this movement with my hands, and found it quite impossible to obtain even a similar effect. It was all very curious.

The *pièce de résistance* of this most remarkable séance was the appearance of a feminine arm and hand, complete from elbow, which slowly emerged from between the curtains, with the basket between its fingers. The basket, in *mid-air*, had already been swept into the cabinet, and

to our astonishment the basket emerged from between the curtains which parted and revealed to most of the onlookers a perfectly formed woman's arm, with hand and fingers similar to those which had nearly touched a sitter's hand just previously, except that the hand appeared to possess all its fingers. It is curious how one's thoughts turn to comparisons in such circumstances. I immediately likened the arm—and especially its upward movements—to a swan's neck and head, in a pose similar to that which the shadowgrapher makes when he throws the picture of a swan on his screen. All the sitters agreed that it was a

perfectly formed arm, like a woman's; white, with fingers; and bare from the elbow. It was a brilliant spectacle.

Other things happened that night, besides the appearance of the "pseudopods." I had my trouser-leg tugged twice, the small of my back thumped once, and "something" brushed past me—almost *pushed* past me—between my chair and the bookcase against the side of which Rudi used to lean when coming out of trance. Another sitter's leg was also touched, or something brushed past it. The first time I felt the entity brush past me I said nothing, in order to see whether "Olga" (the alleged "spirit con-

trol " or trance personality which always speaks through Rudi's lips at these séances) had done it for my special benefit, and whether " she " would mention the fact. " She " did, and then I acknowledged that I had felt something brushing past. The manifestation was then repeated. In addition to the other phenomena witnessed at this Christmas séance, every one felt very cold, the temperature appearing to change several times during the sitting.

In case the reader does not appreciate the severity of the control under which we witnessed the above extraordinary manifestations, I must ask him

to remember that during the whole of the period of the trance, Rudi and I were connected with four electric-light indicators which never wavered ; his wrists were held in a vice-like grip by me, and his legs were pressed close against mine. His hands were also controlled by another sitter, a lady, and during every major phenomenon she informed the circle that she was verifying the position of all our limbs. The phenomena were witnessed in a much better light than usual, and the trance seemed deeper. Rudi was moaning and panting alternately when "Olga" was not speaking to us, and half the time Rudi's head was on my

chest. All the other sitters were, as usual, electrically controlled. It was a brilliant evening and the phenomena were as varied and interesting as they were brilliant. If Rudi's reputation rested on nothing more than this one séance, his mediumship was proved up to the hilt. Never, in the recorded history of any psychic, have phenomena been witnessed under such a merciless triple control of medium and sitters. We waited for another half-hour or so, but as no further manifestations appeared to be forthcoming, we told Rudi to "wake up," at the same time switching on the orange lights, which were afterwards changed

for white. Rudi at last gave a yawn, stretched himself, and thus ended my most brilliant Christmas séance.

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